

Paranoid space: Conspiracy theory and the new politics of logistics

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Abstract

At the contiguous ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach, dockworkers frequently deploy conspiracy theories to explain the securitized, containerized, and automated spaces in which they live and work. Contra extant explanations of conspiracy theory as irrational, deviant, or simply shoddy epistemology, this article argues that longshore paranoia should be taken seriously as an expressive form of political critique and spatial praxis. Drawing on 16 months of ethnographic research carried out at the L.A./Long Beach port complex, the argument plays out in four parts. First, I situate longshore paranoia in relation to existing scholarship on conspiracy theory. Second, I analyze instances of paranoid expression at L.A./Long Beach, describing how dockworkers use conspiracy theory to make sense of their increasingly mediated working environments. Third, I argue that longshore paranoia effectively transforms the port into what I call a paranoid space. Finally, fourth, I briefly take up the crucial political dimensions of conspiracy theory, showing how dockworkers' spatial praxis shifts responsibility for logistical violence onto capitalist shipping companies and terminal operators. Longshore paranoia can thus be understood as a critical effort to hold logistical power to account.

Keywords

Conspiracy theory, supply chains, logistics, opacity, paranoia, Port of Los Angeles, Port of Long Beach, California

On March 31, 2020, 2 weeks into mandated shutdowns precipitated by the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, Eduardo Moreno, a 44-year-old train engineer, drove his locomotive at high speed off the end of a rail line at the Port of Los Angeles. His aim, he told law enforcement later, was to ram the US Navy hospital ship *Mercy*, which was docked nearby. In interviews with port police and the FBI, Moreno stated repeatedly that he was suspicious of the ship because he believed “it had an alternate purpose related to COVID-19 or a government takeover.” He had been “putting all the pieces together,” he explained, and now he wanted

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to wake people up. [...] You only get this chance once. The whole world is watching. I had to. People don't know what's going on here. Now they will. At night, they turn off the lights and don't let anyone in. I'm going to expose this to the world. (Swain, 2020 Aff. p. 4, 6)

Moreno's careening locomotive crashed through a concrete barrier and two chain-link fences, then came to rest in a gravel lot some 250 yards from the *Mercy*. The ship was not damaged, and no injuries were reported, though the derailment resulted in 2000 gallons of diesel fuel spilling onto port tidelands. Moreno himself walked away unscathed. In December 2021, he pleaded guilty in federal court to "one count of committing a terrorist attack and other violence against railroad carriers and mass transportation systems." He was subsequently sentenced to 3 years in prison and ordered to pay \$755,880 toward port clean-up costs.

Recent accounts of conspiracy theory in the news media tend to depict it as shoddy or deviant thinking. The origin of this diagnosis is the liberal historian Richard Hofstadter, who, writing in *Harper's Magazine* in 1964, famously identified a "paranoid style" at the heart of American political life. Key to Hofstadter's account is that this style cannot be reduced to a clinical condition, but neither does it rise to the level of mass ideology. Rather, he describes it as a collective pathology, an ambient "way of life" characterized by "heated exaggeration, suspiciousness, and conspiratorial fantasy" (Hofstadter, 1964: n/p). Moreno's suggestion that the *Mercy* is not what it appears to be, that the ship is in actuality the locus of a sprawling, insidious plot that only he can see, his grandiose plan to reveal the conspiracy to "the world" in a spectacular act of sabotage—all of these details would appear to confirm Hofstadter's analysis, which rests, ultimately, on a sharp distinction between reason and feeling, between rationality and derangement, and between signal and noise. Normative political discourse lives on one side of this line, while conspiracy theory looms threateningly on the other.

Contra Hofstadter, this article develops an account of conspiracy theory premised not on its supposedly irreconcilable relationship to reason, facts, or reality, but rather on how it mediates space and intervenes concretely in everyday life. Conspiracy theory, I argue, is not in essence an irrational set of feelings or beliefs; rather, it constitutes an expressive form of political critique and imaginative spatial practice. I develop this argument by analyzing conspiracy theories espoused by dockworkers at the contiguous Ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach—the largest port complex in the Western hemisphere—where I have carried out 16 months of ethnographic fieldwork since 2021. Like much recent conspiracy theorizing in the United States and elsewhere, the paranoid talk of longshore workers dovetails with far-right political discourse in troubling ways. However, in the context of L.A./Long Beach, I contend that conspiracy theory also fulfills a more immediate and concrete function: namely, it enables longshore workers to make sense of port spaces and processes that are largely inaccessible to direct observation due to increasingly automated workflows, expanded surveillance measures, and the basic fact of containerized cargo. Faced with opaque logistical systems, my interlocutors use conspiracy theory to explain their work to themselves and to others, and to draw connections between their own individual lives and far-flung forces and events. In this way, by applying conspiracy theory to their surroundings as a kind of scalar decoder ring, dockworkers transform the port environment into what I call a paranoid space, with implications for labor relations and the politics of logistics at L.A./Long Beach and, at least gesturally, at other ports and logistical spaces around the world.

My analysis of port space is based on participant observation and interviews with dockworkers both at L.A./Long Beach itself and in the surrounding communities of San Pedro, Wilmington, and Long Beach. Over the past 5 years, I have made regular research trips to the Southern California port complex, where I have spent time with longshore workers moving cargo in battered, single-seater terminal tractors, in break rooms at cargo terminals across the two ports, in the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) Local 13 dispatch hall and back offices, in the remote operations centers at all three of L.A./Long Beach's automated terminals, riding along on the night shift with ILWU Business Agents, who represent longshore workers in dockside disputes with management, and at

restaurants, cafes, parks, and private homes across the South Bay. Of the two dozen people I developed close relationships with, roughly half engaged in conspiracy theorizing at least once in my presence, and four did so regularly. Beyond this core group, I observed many other port workers casually deploy conspiracy theory while explaining port processes to me or others. To a person, my interlocutors asked not to be named, reflecting both a widespread suspicion of outsiders in many port communities and, more concretely, the economic and political pressures of the 2021–23 supply chain crisis and the concurrent contract negotiations between the ILWU and maritime capital in the same period.

In this article, I focus on paranoid statements made by one worker in particular—a crane driver and ILWU member I will call “Evelyn.” I center my analysis on Evelyn, who is in her mid-50s and has worked at the port complex for three decades, because her interpretation of port operations typifies the expressive mode of political paranoia I have come to associate with Southern California longshore workers more broadly, and because her detailed explanations provide a particularly rich opportunity for discourse analysis. However, I want to emphasize that Evelyn’s conspiratorial outlook is neither anomalous nor particularly extreme as compared to her fellow dockworkers. Indeed, across terminals and job categories, my interlocutors at L.A./Long Beach routinely engaged in conspiratorial talk; they dismissed official explanations as explicitly deceptive, they portrayed various institutional bodies and relationships—including, occasionally, the union itself—as captured by powerful interests, and they repeatedly framed routine issues such as vessel arrivals and departures, stalled port development projects, and minor policy shifts as the result of hidden coordination rather than error, mismanagement, or unintended consequences. “We don’t know what actually goes on here because we’re not supposed to know. There are so many secrets,” a remote crane operator at the Trapac terminal told me.¹ At the Long Beach Container Terminal, another dockworker pointed at a manager’s office door and said, “They know everything.”² These recurring formulations of secret knowledge are not merely isolated gripes. Rather, they form a shared interpretive grammar and emergent common sense through which many dockworkers strive to make sense of the increasing opacity of port space. Evelyn’s expressive discourse is analytically useful, then, not because it is unique or exceptional, but because it conveys in expansive detail how Southern California dockworkers *in general* seek to reconcile their lived experience of port space with the abstract logics that govern contemporary logistical systems.

For some dockworkers, this effort at reconciliation gives rise to what I call paranoid space. The concept of paranoid space has relevance for two reasons. First, because it implies a basis for communal existence, or what might be called a notional politics, centered not on labor power—i.e., the capacity to do work and to sell it for a wage—but rather on a shared experience of space. Dockworkers’ conspiratorial spatial praxis effectively shifts blame—and with it the burden of proof—for logistical violence onto the powerful capitalist shipping companies and terminal operators who are primarily responsible for it. As such, I argue that at L.A./Long Beach, conspiracy theory should be understood as a properly critical effort to hold logistical power to account, though with no guarantees vis-à-vis actually existing political outcomes. At issue here is what might be called the ideology of logistics—which is to say, logistics *as* ideology, and not simply as reality—in a period marked by the consolidation of logistical capital over port space and logistical subjectivity alike (Sibilia this volume, Jensen this volume). Paranoid space indexes this intensification while simultaneously disclosing its limits.

Second, the concept paranoid space suggests that even as logistical workers have become increasingly conspiratorial, so too has conspiracy theory itself become increasingly logistical in its organization, its spatial imaginaries, and its strategic (if unconscious) deployment of doubt or nonknowledge. Like intermodal supply chains themselves, conspiracy theories are complex, adaptable systems built to incorporate new information—even contradictory information—in real time. Yet this flexibility and variability are subsumed, in both cases, to a higher-level stability that is rarely challenged by events. By bringing otherwise disconnected sites, events, and actors into a single, totalizing structure, conspiracy theory transforms uncertainty and ambiguity into productive explanation, converting gaps in understanding into connective tissue that binds disparate events into a meaningful whole.³ This

transformation in turn raises the crucial issue of what might be called the agnatology of logistics—the question of the manufacture and strategic deployment of opacity, secrecy, disinformation, and non-knowledge by shipping companies, terminal operators, and logistical capital more generally. Thinking with this question, I explore how for many longshore workers the L.A./Long Beach port complex has become an informational void even as novel automated systems produce vast new troves of ostensibly actionable backend data.

Of course, the logistical turn in conspiratorial thought I diagnose here reflects major shifts in US political culture over the past decade or so—a period marked by the resurgence of suspicion, disinformation, and polarization at the very center of political life. The assault on expert knowledge during the COVID-19 pandemic, the mainstreaming of fascist rhetoric, and the corrupt and craven politics of the Trump administration have together eroded liberalism's claim to rational consensus. In this environment, conspiracy theory has become a key idiom through which many Americans interpret power, including those, like my interlocutors, who have historically been aligned with progressive labor movements. As a growing body of scholarship suggests, the paradox that many minoritarian communities now articulate critiques of capital in registers resonant with far-right populism signals the emergence of a new political formation, in which the failures of liberal democracy and the crises of global capitalism have converged (Brown, 2019; Davies and Gane, 2021; Hochschild, 2016). My analysis of longshore paranoia intervenes in these debates around the shifting politics of capitalist subjectivity today. But unlike Stefano Harney and Fred Moten's "logistical subject," or, for that matter, Marx's "automatic subject," the paranoid subjects I engage with here exhibit a concrete sense of their own agential power as workers at a strategic logistical chokepoint, while simultaneously focusing attention on global capital's ability to infiltrate and capture—if only ever partially—even famously militant labor organizations like the ILWU.⁴ The paranoid space I diagnose here might be usefully grasped as what Gramsci called a "morbid symptom" of capitalist crisis, i.e., an indication that half a century of neoliberal development is now drawing to a close and, simultaneously, that whatever emergent system of exploitation, domination, and accumulation comes next has yet to be born.

The article plays out in four parts. Part one briefly surveys extant research on conspiracy theory, beginning not with Hofstadter's dualistic framing, but with recent scholarship that provides novel resources for thinking in a more nuanced manner about the paranoid space of L.A./Long Beach. Part two examines a few concrete instances of paranoid expression at the port complex, drawn from my conversations with Evelyn and other dockworkers. Here I begin to unpack the litany of local forces and historical events that have shaped Evelyn's conspiratorial outlook, including increasingly automated and opaque port labor processes, hostile employers, and, not least, the supply chain slowdown of 2021–23. Part three delves into the spatial and scalar consequences of longshore paranoia. Here I argue that longshore workers' conspiratorial outlook effectively transforms the port environment—symbolically and materially—into a space of paranoia. In the context of L.A./Long Beach, then, conspiracy theory is shown to have much in common not only with critical theory (as many scholars have observed) but more specifically with critical spatial theory, in ways that will be recognizable, if unsettling, to critical geographers. Finally, part four briefly details the crucial political consequences of longshore conspiracy theorizing, situating paranoid space in the context of port labor relations and the broader politics of maritime logistics. Here, I suggest that dockworker paranoia presages emergent political currents that cut across the traditional labor-capital divide that has structured waterfront work for more than a century.

Extant approaches

Fear of conspiratorial plots is nothing new. For elites in particular, conspiracies have been a recurring source of anxiety for centuries, if not millennia (Kasimis, 2024; Roisman, 2006; Schmidt, 2018). Scholarly analysis of conspiracy theory as such, however, dates only to the mid-20th century, and

is anchored by two figures: Hofstadter and the philosopher of science Karl Popper. Writing in the 1960s, both approached conspiracy theory through a liberal-rationalist lens, treating it as a deviation from reasoned political discourse. Popper critiqued “the conspiracy theory of society,” arguing that while actual conspiracies undoubtedly occur, they are rarely successful and thus should not occupy a central place in social analysis (Pigden, 1995). Like Hofstadter, Popper dismissed conspiracy theory as a secularized form of religious belief (Coady, 2006). Beginning in the 1990s, however, scholars increasingly challenged these liberal framings (Dean, 2000; Keeley, 1999; Marcus, 1999; Melley, 2000; Pigden, 1995), responding to a cascade of real conspiracies and state-corporate violence in the United States and beyond through the latter half of the 20th century, including political assassinations, covert warfare, environmental deception, corporate gaslighting, and the restructuring of global political economy through NAFTA and the Washington Consensus. By the end of the decade, conspiracy theory had become, as Kathleen Stewart observed, “ever present, unavoidable, pervasive, compulsive, fun, frightening, and fascinating, often to the point of a paranoid-mystical urgency” (Marcus, 1999: 13). In this context, scholars sought to move beyond pathologization by examining conspiracy theory’s contradictory internal logics, for example by distinguishing between “warranted” and “unwarranted” conspiracies (Keeley, 1999). A further efflorescence of conspiratorial thinking after 9/11—focused both on the attacks themselves and on the US invasion of Iraq under the false pretext of weapons of mass destruction—yielded another wave of scholarship in the early 2000s that emphasized the social, political, and economic conditions shaping conspiratorial belief rather than policing its epistemic legitimacy (Coady, 2006, 2007; Moore, 2016; Rääkkä, 2018; West and Sanders, 2003). Today, amid what Masco and Wedeen describe as “a profound condition of epistemic precarity,” conspiracy theory has arguably entered a new “golden age,” even as scholars debate whether paranoia itself is historically exceptional or simply newly visible (Masco and Wedeen, 2024: 429; Uscinski et al., 2022). Responding to these conditions, the past decade has seen the emergence of a significant critical literature on conspiracy theory, of which three recent approaches are especially relevant for my analysis of paranoid space.

First, Masco and Wedeen (2024) suggest that to have any chance of grasping the operations of power today, it is necessary to move further into and through conspiratorial thought, rather than against and away from it as many earlier scholars of paranoia argued. This is because paranoia, they contend, tends to accrete at the margins of society, if not always in direct opposition to hegemonic worldviews, then at least external to or in excess of the dominant narratives and received knowledge that structure public and political life today. In some cases, conspiracy theories may “elevat[e] different values and different understandings of collective life,” and thus contribute to “a political culture that is more equal, less violent, and more democratic” (Masco and Wedeen, 2024: 18). I would agree that conspiracy theory can be a powerful narrative site of counterfactual worldmaking, where individuals and communities may interpellate themselves and their relationships to others in a heterodox manner, and in ways that are at least potentially liberatory. But of course, recent political rhetoric in the United States and elsewhere would indicate that paranoia and conspiracy theory may just as easily tilt in a much darker and more violent direction. What Masco and Wedeen make clear is that scientific or social facts themselves are not, in general, enough. That is, they do not provide sufficient grounding for those minoritarian or subaltern subjects who are interested not only in interpreting the world, but also in changing and improving it. To move the political dial, it is necessary to draw on more than just facts. Or, as they put it: “To trust that facts alone can redirect political energies is to ignore the power of affect, fantasy, fear, and cathexis in politics” (2024: 18). This notion tracks closely with the Moreno incident. Moreno, like many paranoid subjects, appears to have been motivated by a deeply felt suspicion of elites and of elite knowledge. “At night, they turn off the lights and don’t let anyone in,” he told investigators. It is unclear who the “they” in this sentence describes, exactly; it seems to be a reference, most immediately, to the crew and officers of the *Mercy* itself, and by extension to the US government that the ship spectacularly represents. However, I would

emphasize that Moreno's conspiratorial ire is directed not at some abstract fact or piece of expert knowledge, or even at an expert or authority figure per se, but rather at a material object—a ship—which, like all material objects, has a certain symbolic or representative power. As we will see, this conspiratorial emphasis on the concrete over the abstract will repeat itself below.

Second, in 2016 the political theorist Robyn Marasco (2016) advanced a critique of Hofstadter's "paranoid style," on the basis that the term "style" was too weak to capture conspiracy theory's particular "hold on the political psyche" (237). Neither, she points out, should we mistake conspiracy theory for a claim to knowledge or "stigmatized knowledge" (Barkun, 2003), or for a structure of feeling, as per Raymond Williams. Nor, she argues, is conspiracy theory ultimately about pulling back the curtain on secret plots and cover-ups of violence perpetrated by the state or other institutions. After all, today, as Marasco notes, state and corporate violence are routinely carried off right out in the open, no cover-ups—and thus no conspiratorial revelations—necessary. Think, for instance, of the endless stream of unprovoked police killings, the slow violence of corporate pollution, the blatant racism of the sprawling prison system, or, for that matter, the US government's unfaltering support of Netanyahu's ongoing genocide in Palestine. "Paranoiac optics involve rituals of repeated unmasking, as if the political problem is one of secrets and not of structures, as if more evidence will somehow be what's finally decisive," writes Marasco (239). She goes on to perform a counterintuitive psychoanalytic reading of conspiracy theory, arguing that paranoia, ultimately, is a comforting reification and idealization of power, "in which power *really is* what it says about itself, really is all-powerful, really does have clear and known ends, and really can meet these ends with exactness and efficiency" (238). The paranoiac is libidinally attached to power—to being dominated by power—even as they claim to want to defenestrate it via unmasking. In this way, as the mid-century critical theorists saw clearly, conspiracy theory is internally connected to repressive authority, and ultimately to fascism.⁵ Marasco's psychoanalysis further suggests that conspiracy theory productively collapses real distinctions between different kinds of power, i.e., corporate vs. state; openly repressive vs. regulatory-biopolitical, capitalist accumulation vs. police violence, etc. Her point, as I understand it, is not that these things are all the same or different, but that they are all internally connected to domination, and so to a desire for subjugation. If we take Marasco seriously, then conspiracy theory provides a view onto the totality of life under capitalism, which, while suspect in many of its details, is in a more general sense correct in identifying the interrelationships that collectively structure the world today. Conspiracy theory itself *is* this totalizing view.

Third, and perhaps most importantly, I want to engage with two recent approaches that bring spatial methods and concepts to bear on conspiracy theory. First, Johnson-Schlee (2019) argues that conspiratorial speech should be understood as a discursive means of scale jumping, and specifically of explaining "the conditions of everyday life on the edge of society and relat[ing] them to the global scale of national political discourse." Like Marasco, Johnson-Schlee adopts a psychoanalytic perspective, suggesting that precarious people—in this case, visitors to a soup kitchen in Brixton—use conspiracy theory to "claim their own autonomy" in response to state-led behavior-change policies that not only fail to meet them on their own terms, but turn the local spaces in which they live into hostile environments. The state treats poor and disenfranchised people as fundamentally irrational; conspiracy theory, argues Johnson-Schlee, is their way of pushing back at this characterization. Specifically, here, conspiracy theory is interrogated as "spatialized discourse" or "spatialized narrative." It is spatial because it mediates between the small-scale spaces and institutions of everyday life and the transnational spaces and institutions of global politics and economy, showing how the former are shaped by—and often held captive by—the latter.

In a similar manner, Çaylı (2018) describes how conspiracy theory—here examined in the context of public commemorations of a 1990s arson attack in Turkey—deploys the spatial metaphor of inside vs. outside, along with closely related binaries like us vs. them and transparency vs. concealment. He shows how, as a result of the state's efforts to commemorate the attack, both the city in which the

attack took place and the nation-state as a whole are imagined “as an immaculate and peaceful inside threatened by a hostile and polluted outside.” Çaylı argues that these divisions are more than discursive metaphors. Rather, he proposes that both the commemorative architecture and the annual public events that seek to memorialize the attack effectively concretize conspiratorial understandings of the event. In this way, the built environment itself comes to serve as a conspiratorial account of and justification for nationalist political violence.

In what follows, I draw on both Çaylı’s and Johnson-Schlee’s arguments about conspiracy theory as a form of spatial practice. Like Johnson-Schlee, the specific mode of paranoia I identify emerges from within a community that feels dominated by powers greater than themselves, and who use conspiracy theory to mediate spatial imaginaries across scale. But while Johnson-Schlee’s interlocutors engage in conspiratorial thinking from the apparent margins—or “the edge”—of society, the conspiracy theories I analyze here emerge from a central node of capitalist production networks. And whereas Çaylı describes events and environments that developed *in response to* conspiracy theory, I focus instead on space itself as a catalyst for conspiratorial thinking. More broadly, while for Johnson-Schlee, conspiracy theory is mainly a discursive practice of the powerless, and for Çaylı, it is largely conditioned by the powerful (i.e., the state), my analysis suggests a more variegated and unstable picture.⁶ This instability is a function, in part, of events themselves—that is, of the current conjuncture—which has overtaken even many cutting-edge critiques of power that rely on an analysis of the limits and failures of liberalism. To grasp these shifting dynamics, I attend closely to the port itself, to its material infrastructures, its labor relations, its ongoing technological transformation, and the highly contingent forms of opacity, enclosure, and mediation that structure everyday life and work on the docks today. It is within these localized yet globally entangled logistical environments that conspiracy theory comes to function not merely as a transcendent belief or universal discursive practice, but as a situated mode of spatial and political praxis shaped by the “translocal” organization of port space and logistical power (Greiner and Sakdapolrak, 2013).

Thinking conspiracy theory, space, and logistics together in this manner has implications for critical geographical thought itself, which has long been premised on what I would call conspiracy-adjacent theorizing about power’s spatial ramifications. I do not mean this dismissively or cynically. Rather, my intention here is to validate geography’s conspiratorial disposition, and to suggest that what the discipline needs is more, not less, paranoid political praxis. This is because, as Çaylı puts it, conspiracy theory “refuses to perceive events as complete,” or “to settle with only explaining them.” Like critique more generally, then, conspiracy theory is interventionist in the strong sense. For many of my interlocutors at L.A./Long Beach, that is, paranoia is a powerful means not only of rethinking or reimagining port space, but of transforming what port space means, how it functions, and how workers interact with it.

Logistical paranoia

Over the course of my fieldwork, my interlocutors referred to a wide array of conspiracies, from well-known theories centered on the 2020 presidential election, chemtrails, 9/11, QAnon, and the supposed threat of a looming totalitarian world government, to more localized narratives focused on ILWU politics, port development planning, and the influence of foreign shipping companies on local officials. For example, as one veteran worker put it in a discussion of port governance, “the people here at the port aren’t the ones making the decisions—the real power lies elsewhere.”⁷ Another referred casually to terminal managers and government representatives as “the great pirates,” a term that, as the worker himself pointed out, originated with Buckminster Fuller (1969: 6).⁸ While I observed no clear correlation between specific job categories, demographic identities, or union status, on the one hand, and particular theories, on the other, the dockworkers with whom I spent the most time tended to fixate on three conspiracies, in particular. These included the belief that COVID-19 vaccines contain

microchips or tracking devices that are “meant to hurt us or make us sick” as one of my interlocutors told me; the notion that fifth-generation (5G) telecommunications technology poses health risks and enables workplace surveillance; and the conviction that elites—specifically corporate managers and political representatives—are engaged in a coordinated effort to undermine workers and consumers alike.⁹ “They’re carrying out a secret war on the middle class,” one worker explained to me, in the context of a conversation about pandemic policy, inflation, and efforts to further automate cargo handling.¹⁰

The first two of these three theories foreground what many dockworkers understand to be the nefarious power of technology to erode worker agency and value. “They’re cutting out labor—that’s all this is,” said a young worker, during a conversation about terminal automation.¹¹ This interpretation draws on a long and well-documented history of terminal operators deploying new technologies to weaken organized labor power on the waterfront—think of palettization in the 1940s and 50s, containerization in the 60s, 70s, and 80s, computerization in the 90s and 2000s, the introduction of automated cargo-handling equipment in the 2010s, and so on. Workers at L.A./Long Beach frequently invoke this history when explaining their distrust of official narratives about technological progress. The third theory—that there is an elite plot to disenfranchise or otherwise do harm to workers and consumers alike—combines longstanding paranoid notions about a secret world government with the fraught politics of logistics. Notably, many paranoid theories of elite control—including some of those deployed by my interlocutors—draw on antisemitic, racist, and other violent caricatures that I condemn unequivocally. At L.A./Long Beach, paranoid workers tended to deploy iterations of this theory to explain a litany of seemingly disparate events and processes. In this way, port management, regulators, and even union leadership were depicted as in league with broader forces and as operating beyond public scrutiny, while media coverage of port issues was disparaged as doing the bidding of special interests. For example, as one worker put it to me, with reference to news reports linking supply chain congestion to COVID-19 stay-at-home orders, “I don’t believe any of it. Who are the gatekeepers? Who decides what gets reported, what gets trusted? They own the media.”¹² Taken together, these three narratives form a flexible and durable interpretive framework through which many dockworkers seek to make sense of the manifold processes in which they participate. I turn next to a single instance of conspiratorial talk in detail to examine how conspiratorial reason crystallizes around a specific policy intervention and a particular stretch of port space.

In late October 2021, at the height of the supply chain crisis, the Biden administration announced that federal negotiators had brokered a deal to begin running the Port of Los Angeles 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. In a speech announcing the plan, Biden said that the idea was to “speed up the delivery of goods all across America” by moving cargo on a nonstop basis through the busiest port in the largest consumer market in the world (Boak, 2021: n/p). A week later, on an unusually warm autumn morning, I met Evelyn for a walk along the commercial waterfront in downtown San Pedro. When I asked her what she thought of the 24/7 deal, she paused a moment, then said:

It’s all lies. It’s all lies. [...] I mean, if you don’t know the industry, on the outside people are going to believe all these lies. I keep telling people, you can’t pick and choose who you believe [in] the media. Like, why do you believe them about anything? [...] I don’t know, I mean look, I can’t even believe that right there. When Biden was campaigning, there were plenty of opportunities to talk to our union. [Biden and the union] are on a face-to-face basis. For him not to be able to understand our position, I just don’t buy it.

Some context is necessary here. By “our position,” Evelyn means the position of the ILWU. For decades, the union has been clear that its members are ready and willing to work on a 24/7 basis, so long as they are paid overtime wages for the extra labor, as per their contract with terminal operators. From the union’s perspective, then, the 24/7 plan was not only superfluous, but also extremely unlikely to have any real impact, for the simple reason that for it to succeed, maritime capital—namely the terminal

operators, the shipowners, and, ultimately, the shippers themselves—would have to pay longshore workers to work the so-called hoot shift. Union members surmised that these corporations were unlikely to agree to pay the additional wages, even if they were asked nicely to do so by the federal government. Moreover, ILWU members were doubtful about the basic logic of the 24/7 plan—the idea, that is, that adding additional shifts at the port would reduce cargo congestion “all across America,” as Biden put it. As the dockworkers knew, the ports were congested because there was nowhere for the containers to go—the inland warehouses that are the final destination for much of the cargo coming into the US west coast were full up. Adding an extra shift at the port would not somehow magically resolve this larger issue. For these reasons, Evelyn did not believe the 24/7 plan would work as promised.¹³

But when she says, “it’s all lies,” Evelyn is questioning not only the plan itself, but also the legitimacy and motives of the institutions behind the plan, specifically senior port officials and the federal government. Biden, she suggests, knows full well that expanding working hours at the port complex will not, in reality, resolve the supply chain slowdown. The implication is that the federal government was using L.A./Long Beach dockworkers as a prop in an elaborate piece of political theater, aimed not at resolving the underlying problems that caused the crisis, but at saving face and scoring political points.

Gesturing toward San Pedro Bay, where more than 80 containerhips were moored at anchor just off the coast, waiting for berthing space at the port, Evelyn continued:

Do you see all these ships? This is part of the narrative right here. These ships don’t have to be here. They could, in a day, be up at [the Port of] Oakland, which is empty right now. The cranes up there are all boomed up. If they can travel up there in a day and offload this cargo, why are they sitting here? These companies, these are the guys that sit on the board of directors of the IMF, these are the guys that sit on the board of directors of the World Bank. They have more money than they need. [...] The word on the waterfront is that the first five containers that leave the ship basically already pay for the voyage. So [gesturing again to the ships moored offshore] there’s something else going on here. This is the narrative. This is a great visual for the amount of leverage and control these people have. They control these companies. They control the world.

There is a lot to unpack here. On the one hand, I am sympathetic to the idea that maritime capital “controls the world,” as Evelyn puts it. She has worked at the port for 25 years, first driving top-handlers—a strenuous, difficult, and highly physical job—and then, more recently, driving transtainer cranes and undergoing training to operate the giant ship-to-shore gantry cranes that dominate port landscapes around the world. She is not wrong that the ocean carriers and the terminal operators have immense commercial power. Not only do they own the means of production and profit from her labor, but she has watched them repeatedly attack and successfully chip away at union solidarity over the past few decades, most recently by seeking to automate away longshore jobs.¹⁴ The superprofits recorded by the carriers during the supply chain crisis would appear to confirm her suspicion that the ships waiting offshore in late 2021 were, in fact, still making money for their owners, the shipping lines. On the other hand, I am skeptical about Evelyn’s blanket distrust of the media, about the way she elides shipowners with IMF and World Bank directors, and about the idea that the first five containers off the ship pay for the entire voyage. Regarding this last point: even at the height of the supply chain crisis, the cost of moving a box from Shanghai to L.A. was ~\$25,000, which means that five boxes were worth around \$125,000. This is not enough to cover the fuel costs for a single journey across the Pacific for even a mid-sized container ship, much less the entire cost of the trip for a large ship (i.e., a vessel with a capacity of 14,000 TEUs or above). Evelyn goes on to interpret both the vessels at anchor off the coast of San Pedro and also the gantry cranes “all boomed up” at the Port of Oakland as material evidence of a conspiracy by powerful interests. Similarly, over the next few months, she regularly texts me videos she’s made from her perch five stories up in a transtainer crane, looking down on the port. To her, these

videos, which show little to no activity at the usually busy port, suggest organized, top-down malfeasance by shipowners, port management, and other powerful interests; to me, they indicate that supply chains are in fact congested, as had already been widely reported at the time.

What to say about Evelyn's paranoid analysis of port space? First, I would observe that for her, the port landscape itself appears to have become both a repository of anxiety and an object of critical analysis. When I first met Evelyn in June 2021, 6 months before Biden announced the White House's 24/7 plan, she explained to me that her politics had always been very far to the left, but that in recent years she had become increasingly skeptical of and disenchanted with politics in general, including the politics of the leadership of her own union, the ILWU. While back in 2012 Evelyn had helped to organize San Pedro Labor Fest, a community celebration of longshore labor co-sponsored by the ILWU, she explained to me that today she was no fan of the union. Union leaders, she said, were only in it for their own benefit, and she implied that they were happy to take bribes in exchange for selling out their workers to automation. These ideas are, of course, classic anti-labor smears that have dogged the ILWU since its founding in 1937 (along with many other major unions in the United States and elsewhere). When I asked when she first became skeptical toward the union, Evelyn pointed to what she described as the ILWU's failure to fight terminal operators and instead accept buyouts in exchange for allowing automated machinery on the docks. She pointed specifically to the drawn-out battle over automation at Pier 400—the largest container terminal at the Port of L.A.—in 2019. Over the course of a year of contentious public hearings, Maersk, the terminal operator, won the right to automate Pier 400 over the complaints of the ILWU. This loss—and Maersk's subsequent rapid automation of operations at Pier 400—led Evelyn to suspect not just that union leadership was weak for not pushing through a strike vote against the company, but that there must be some other, secret reason why ILWU leaders did not fight Maersk as hard as she thought they should have. By her own description, then, Evelyn's shifting political outlook—and by extension her paranoia—can be understood as a response to recent changes to the port landscape itself.

To be clear, my argument is not that port automation—or any other local event—was the *sole cause* of Evelyn's paranoid outlook. Clearly, she was influenced as well by social media, where, if her texts to me are any indication, she appears to have spent a good deal of time imbibing many of the conspiracy theories circulating in the overheated final days of the first Trump administration, in the months following the fraught 2020 election, and so on. Her paranoia, as might be expected, was contingent and polyvalent—it had multiple causes and multiple targets, and it necessarily reflected broader political currents. That said, her paranoid analysis focuses on concrete features of the port landscape *for a reason*. That is, she enrolls the ships at anchor in the Bay into her speech not just because that's what we were looking at when we spoke, but because for her, the ships themselves function as material evidence of the reach of distant, powerful forces. Evelyn's sense of how the port works has been shaped by the demands of her job. At the same time, her view of port operations is selectively occluded by technology and port policies. Indeed, the careful management of visibility and opacity has long been central to the operations of logistical systems. A key selling point of containerization is that containers hide their contents from prying eyes. For longshore workers, then, the transition from break-bulk to containerized cargo in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s marked a shift from knowing to not knowing what one was moving, from knowledge to ignorance. Recent efforts to automate cargo handling at L.A./Long Beach mark a continuation of this shift. Port automation requires cordoning off large areas of a given terminal for driverless heavy machinery; the remaining workers, meanwhile, are relegated to office blocks on the edge of the terminal, where they monitor terminal operations remotely. In this way, automation, like containerization before it, is a technology of uneven visibility, concealing terminal space from port workers even as it simultaneously produces new sources of high-resolution data for managers.¹⁵ Faced with this informational void, some longshore workers turn to conspiracy theories to fill the gap.

Here, then, we can see how Evelyn's conspiracy theory itself starts to take on a distinctly logistical form. Like the translocal cargo-handling systems it seeks to explain, her paranoid talk elides partial

information across distance, links dispersed and disconnected actors and events, and ultimately yields up an image of a coherent whole that supersedes extant contradictions. This whole is endlessly adaptable and expansive—new details, rumors, or observations are incorporated at will without displacing the overarching structure, much as supply chains reroute around disruptions while continually circulating commodities. In this sense, then, Evelyn's paranoia is not a misreading of port space, nor is it just a discursive reaction to logistical opacity. Rather, it is an effort to think with and through the very forms of knowledge that logistics itself makes available.

Conspiracy theory as critical spatial practice

Evelyn's paranoid analysis of the port environment has much in common, I contend, with what geographers generally call critical spatial practice. Formalized by feminist theorists of art and architecture in the 1990s and 2000s—who themselves drew on classic geographic theory developed in the 1970s and 1980s by Henri Lefebvre, Michel de Certeau, and, later, Doreen Massey, among others—today critical spatial practice has come to describe “a broad range of activities that seek to reshape the built environment in counterhegemonic ways” (Sturlaugson, 2019: n/p). In this section, I want to show that Evelyn's analysis of the supply chain crisis is similarly counterhegemonic and explain how it seeks to concretely reshape port space in ways that resonate with critical geographical approaches. To be clear, my intention is not to celebrate conspiracy theory as such, nor should my argument be mistaken for an unqualified endorsement of paranoia as political practice. Rather, the task is to examine *how* conspiracy theory operates spatially and politically in the specific context of L.A./Long Beach. That is, I am interested in what kinds of claims it makes possible, what forms of responsibility and authority it draws on or casts aside, and what spatial and institutional targets it centers or forecloses. Treating conspiracy theory as a form of spatial practice, then, is not to valorize its content, but to analyze the specific political work it performs, as well as the ambivalent, unstable real-world outcomes that such work may produce.

The argument that conspiracy theory functions as a form of spatial practice, i.e., that it mediates how port space is interpreted, contested, and acted upon, has three parts. First, Evelyn's claim, with reference to the ships offshore, that “this is the narrative,” explicitly distinguishes her own understanding of the supply chain crisis from extant accounts of the situation. The conventional explanations are, of course, complex and multiple, but they have certain shared characteristics. They tend to focus, for instance, on the glut of pandemic-induced retail consumption in the United States in 2020 and 2021. Americans, bored at home and with cash to spare (“discretionary funds,” in the lingo of economics), thanks to federal stimulus checks, shifted their spending *en masse* from services to commodity goods. At the same time, the story goes, strict pandemic-related controls in China negatively impacted suppliers' ability to meet elevated demand. The logistics industry itself, meanwhile, was simply not prepared for the resulting influx of freight. Hence, cargo piled up at ports across the country, and especially at L.A./Long Beach, which accounts for around 40% of all inbound containers into the United States. The key site of congestion, however, was not berthing space for incoming ships or container storage space on the docks, but rather outbound truck and train capacity and, ultimately, storage space in inland warehouses. With nowhere else to go, containers stacked up at the ports, vessel traffic ground to a halt, and supply/demand pressures caused the cost of shipping a single container from China to the United States to ramp up precipitously. Retailers, meanwhile, increasingly factored the rising cost of shipping into consumer prices, which caused inflation to flare up, exacerbated economic precarity, and contributed to complex political outcomes that continue to play out today. As a White House economic briefing document summed up the situation in late 2023, the “collision of pandemic-induced supply shocks and strong demand for goods generated inflationary pressure across the global economy” (The White House, 2023: n/p). In response to the crisis, governments and corporations sought to improve supply chain *resilience*—a catch-all buzzword for a litany of programs

aimed at increasing retail inventories, improving cargo data collection and circulation, investing in public infrastructure, moving production closer to consumer markets, and so on.

This general account of the crisis is well-known and widely accepted today, both by corporate managers and policymakers. According to Evelyn, however, it is not only wrong, but a cover-up—"all lies," as she puts it. Her authority and ability to see through the lies, she implies, is a direct consequence of her situated knowledge as a port worker. The content of her intervention is, in short, that the vessels at anchor in San Pedro Bay represent not so much cargo congestion inland or at the port itself, but rather a *choice* made by their owners, the shipping companies, who have realized that by instructing the ships to drop anchor and wait, they can generate superprofits without providing any service whatsoever, without burning any (expensive) fuel, and apparently without any discernable reputational damage. Her accusation is broader than this, however. The ships moored offshore, she suggests, represent "the amount of leverage and control these people have. They control these companies. They control the world." What to make of this final, sweeping claim? How to handle conspiracy theory when it seems to tip over the invisible line between seemingly valid knowledge, on the one hand, and potentially dangerous paranoia, on the other?¹⁶ I propose that what is required is to take the claim seriously, accounting for perspective and context. Evelyn is correct, for instance, that ship-owners are powerful economic actors. International shipping, which has long benefitted from lax oversight, today operates openly as a cartel. Just nine companies control 80% of global container shipping capacity. Collusion is routine, most dramatically in the form of cargo-sharing alliances, which enable companies that ostensibly compete with one another to cooperate for mutual benefit. Many of these companies, in turn, own outright the terminal operators that control cargo handling operations at L.A./Long Beach and other major ports around the world. As Jensen (this volume) describes this situation, international shipping has undergone considerable consolidation in recent years, with state-aligned firms like Maersk, COSCO, and DP World acquiring numerous port assets in diverse locales, in what amounts to a neo-imperial scramble for port space (see also Swanson, 2025). Evelyn may or may not be aware of these dynamics. Regardless, I would propose that she is correct to assign some blame for the crisis to the shipping companies, the terminal operators, and the federal government.

As the supply chain crisis began to wind down in 2022 and 2023, mainstream actors began to come around to some of the more moderate components of Evelyn's critique. For example, in a speech at L.A./Long Beach in mid-2022, a visibly angry Biden blamed rising inflation on price-gouging by the ocean carriers, and in June 2022, Congress passed the Ocean Shipping Reform Act, which gave the Federal Maritime Commission new powers over vessels operating in US waters, with the goal of boosting competition in maritime shipping. Similarly, today it is widely acknowledged by policymakers, economists, and industry stakeholders that a major contributing factor to the crisis was decades of neoliberal disinvestment in global transport infrastructure and labor—a process described routinely over the past half century as an *investment* in lean or just-in-time logistical systems (Chua, 2022). One consequence of the supply chain crisis has been an attempt by the state to strengthen oversight of logistical systems after years of regulatory capture by the maritime industry.¹⁷ Again, Evelyn may not be familiar with these specific histories, but she correctly diagnoses the uneven power dynamics at play in the industry. That said, while they may begin to address collusion among shipowners, these official actions—and also corporate efforts to make supply chains more resilient—miss the deeper problems that Evelyn points to. These are, in sum, structural issues, having to do with the basic organization of capitalism and political-economic power at a global scale. If we take Evelyn seriously, the supply chain crisis was not really a crisis of commodity circulation at all, but rather a deliberate and intentional consequence of corporate profiteering and greed. Or, put differently, logistics—the industry charged with moving things—was never truly *in* crisis, but rather should be understood as a font of crisis itself. We might imagine the logistics industry as a crisis machine, disrupting cargo flows and cashing checks while generating consumer debt, labor exploitation, overconsumption,

alienation, loneliness, want, and environmental carnage all along the supply chain. This view of events is decidedly counterhegemonic, even radical: it does not conform to received understandings of the supply chain crisis now or in 2021, when Evelyn first said these things. And it runs directly counter to recent efforts to shore up the industry in the wake of the crisis.

Moreover, Evelyn's paranoid framing calls into question the basic meaning and purpose of the very term *crisis* itself, echoing, for example, Janet Roitman's critique of crisis as an analytic category. As Roitman (2014) argues, *crisis* tends to function less as an objective condition or description of reality than as a framing device that naturalizes certain forms of intervention while foreclosing others. Read in this way, Evelyn's refusal to treat the supply chain crisis as an aberration—as a problem to be fixed through better governance or resilience planning—should be understood as a pointed rejection of conventional crisis talk altogether. Instead, her conspiratorial account interprets disruption, delay, and volatility as intrinsic to how logistical capitalism works. This interpretation echoes influential critical analyses of capitalist crisis going back to Marx himself (for instance Arrighi, 1978; Harvey, 1982). It puts pressure, as well, on the insight, central to critical infrastructure studies, that logistical infrastructures become visible only at moments of breakdown (Edwards et al., 2009; Star, 1999). Evelyn's explanation instead suggests that failure is not the exception but the rule—if not the *modus operandi*—of logistical systems, which are designed, in her telling, to reproduce, and profit from disruption.

In Evelyn's account, then, conspiracy theory and logistical systems alike share a basic investment in and positive orientation toward crisis. Like logistics, conspiracy theory thrives on disruption, treats instability as revealing rather than anomalous, and incorporates moments of breakdown and failure into an ongoing, open-ended explanatory framework. As recent scholarship on logistical labor has suggested, the distinctive power of dockworkers lies not only in collective bargaining but in their capacity to intervene directly in commodity circulation itself (Chua and Cox, 2023). Evelyn's conspiratorial logic engages in a similar model of disruption. Her analysis targets circulation itself as the locus of power, treats failure as productive rather than exceptional, and thus reframes logistics not as a neutral technical-managerial platform but as a recursive political-economic system whose motion generates crisis, profit, and domination simultaneously. In this sense, conspiracy theory comes to echo both the dynamics of logistical systems and the political imaginaries through which logistics workers have long sought to contest them.

Second, Evelyn points not only to the companies and state institutions that shape the uneven distribution of power in global shipping, but also to the port workers who, in her telling, comprise the true source of labor power at L.A./Long Beach. The notion that the paranoiac has special access to insider knowledge—a term that is itself premised on a spatial metaphor of inside versus outside—is a classic trope in conspiratorial discourse. In this instance, the “outside” in question consists of the sensible space of the port itself, and specifically the ships at anchor in the bay and the container stacks, the latter of which are inexplicably (according to Evelyn) free of truck traffic. When we look at these things, she suggests, we are seeing only the external façade, the output, or the consequence of logistical power; the real source of this power lies elsewhere. Specifically, the “inside,” as Evelyn suggests, consists of the many places in which decisions about port operations are actually made and enacted, including terminal control rooms, executive suites, government offices, and international development institutions like the IMF and World Bank.

Now, once again, including these latter two entities on the list is, on the face of it, suspect, for a variety of reasons. Most immediately because their inclusion pushes Evelyn's comment into the territory of antisemitic world government theories that have circulated widely for a century or more. Yet here, too, I want to try to take Evelyn seriously. While at first glance it may seem absurd to equate corporate managers with international development executives, I think that Evelyn is making a slightly more subtle point, and one that in fact holds up to scrutiny. The idea that senior managers at global corporations like the shipping lines Maersk, CMA-CGM, and MSC talk to and are involved with

World Bank and/or IMF board members is not just possible, but plausible. Examples abound: the World Economic Forum regularly draws together World Bank and IMF analysts along with representatives of firms including Maersk, MSC, the Port of Rotterdam, Lloyd's Register, and so on; the "Transforming Transportation" conference, an annual event hosted by the World Bank in Washington DC, similarly brings shipping company executives, World Bank reps, and IMF analysts into conversation with one another; and so on. The general point that Evelyn is making here—i.e., that elites have more in common with one another than not and routinely work together to develop strategies to defend their market dominance and shore up their control over labor—is such a well-established fact as to make for rather banal analysis today. Thus, while we might quibble with Evelyn's assertion that the shipping companies "control the world," I would endorse the notion that multinational corporations wield immense economic, political, and cultural power today and that they tend to wield it against unions and unionized workers like Evelyn, in particular. In short, that is, they control much about her world, if not *the* world in general.

Third, while Evelyn does not claim to be on the "inside" of port decision-making per se, she suggests that her years of experience working at L.A./Long Beach have provided her with special insight into how logistical power shapes port space.¹⁸ Her ability to see through the opaque surfaces of logistical capital is partly a function of her unique access to what she calls "the word on the waterfront"—that is, the everyday conversation and discourse of her longshore colleagues. But Evelyn's understanding of logistical power has also emerged directly from her lived sense of port space as opaque and deceptive. For her, the port environment itself elicits paranoia—it is a paranoid space, i.e., a place not to be trusted, where false appearances are the rule rather than the exception. The paranoid space of the port has concrete implications for critical spatial theory, broadly construed. For Evelyn, paranoid space means that she cannot trust in appearances, or what, in Lefebvre's well-known spatial theory, is called *spaces of representation*—that is, lived space as experienced by individuals on an everyday basis. To stick with Lefebvre's triadic framework for a moment, this is because the spaces of representation that Evelyn experiences each day at work conceal deeper representations of space, i.e., the abstract forms of spatial organization and calculation that are imposed on the port by maritime capital, and which provide it with its overarching spatial coherence and purpose. There is, in short, a disjuncture at play here between how port space appears to function and how it actually functions.

Evelyn, for her part, can discern or derive this disconnect between how things look and how things work because of her long practical engagement with port space, or what Lefebvre might call her *spatial practice*, which simply refers to how she has learned to move through and interpret port space over a lifetime spent working at L.A./Long Beach. For Lefebvre, *spatial practice* names an intuitive, active approach to space, a lived relation to one's surrounds that involves ongoing interpretation and agential interaction with space, both in response to and in anticipation of events. It is in this practical sense that Evelyn's paranoia—and also the conspiratorial talk of the many other dockworkers who expressed similar concerns to me—should be understood as more than just idealist discourse, political speech, or sophistic rhetoric. When port workers deploy conspiracy theories in and around the port, they tend to be diagnosing an explicitly spatial problem. It is possible to state this problem in Lefebvre's terms: it has to do with how *representations of space* (the abstractions that control how space functions and what it means) have come to overpower lived *spaces of representation*. In this way, then, Lefebvre's integrative triad, which ostensibly describes the production of social space in general, has become distorted or unbalanced. A *spatial practice* that engages with port space in a paranoid mode, then, is a way of correcting for this loss of coherence from inside the space of the port itself. That is, paranoia functions here as a kind of reparative spatial practice, lending coherence—if only for the paranoid individual and others like them—to port environments. We can also say the same thing in simpler terms: paranoia appears to have helped (some) dockworkers make sense of a working environment that had stopped making sense to many of them. Conspiracy theory, that is, can be a

practical way of remaking port space in real time, as an individual moves through the port over the course of a working day or night. It enables certain dockworkers to gain some purchase over spaces that otherwise feel constrictive, deadening, and alienating.

The politics of paranoia

Experiences of alienation, of course, have long served as a powerful catalyst for both scholarly theorizations of worker subjectivity and practical worker politics. However, paranoia, as I have described it here, appears to have little in common with alienation as it is usually understood. Whereas in classical alienation theory, the alienated subject is estranged both from the products of their labor, from other people, and ultimately from themselves, many of the paranoid dockworkers I spent time with at L.A./Long Beach appear to be actively—if indignantly—engaged in their surroundings, in port labor processes, and in the community of port workers. But, at the same time, dockworkers' conspiratorial logic often clashes with traditional union discourse and hierarchies. The experience of paranoia, that is, seems to produce political subjectivities that do not rely—or at least not entirely—on given or pre-existing groups like the ILWU. This runs counter to the established view that L.A./Long Beach long-shore workers are by definition political subjects by dint of their membership in a labor union that negotiates collectively on their behalf. By setting herself and her paranoid colleagues against this standard framework, Evelyn sets the scene for the formulation of a new political subject—in this case a paranoid subject or a subject defined by their conspiratorial analysis of port space—and, simultaneously, for a new understanding of a port as a place given over in its entirety not to moving cargo as an end in itself, but to using cargo-in-motion (or for that matter cargo that has been intentionally stilled) to generate profits. These are radical shifts in understanding that are explicitly premised on a reorganization of political subjectivity.

In closing, I want to suggest that the politics of paranoia can be politically effective. By *effective*, I mean that a paranoid political praxis succeeds—if only temporarily—in shifting responsibility for the logistics industry's many failings onto powerful capitalist shipping companies and terminal operators. In so doing, this outlook effectively transfers the burden of proof for logistical violence onto those institutions and individuals that in reality bear responsibility for it. This is not to suggest that dockworker paranoia signals a relinquishing of political power. Quite the opposite: by engaging in conspiracy theory and by weaponizing that theory against capitalist shipping companies and terminal operators, Evelyn and her paranoid colleagues have arrived at a novel means of holding logistical power to account. As paranoia continues to spread among port workers—and at least anecdotally, it is spreading—this novel approach to port space and port politics may eventually filter up into union leadership, with unknown but potentially transformative implications. My research suggests that this process is already underway.¹⁹

However, there are no guarantees that the politics of paranoia will yield up a liberatory political subject or empower a new community of workers at L.A./Long Beach anytime soon, or at all. The proliferation of conspiracy theories among dockworkers may turn out to correlate not with an intensification of labor organizing or a progressive reimagining of port subjectivity and space, but rather with rising nativist and nationalist sentiments, and other extreme right-wing beliefs among rank-and-file union members.²⁰ It remains unknown whether the paranoid politics I describe here are present at other ports across the United States (not to mention elsewhere in the world), but there are good reasons to suspect that they may be. Indeed, while L.A./Long Beach occupies a unique place in both the global economy and the public imagination, recent developments at the Southern California port complex have, of course, been shaped by forces and events that have also impacted other ports—and other logistical spaces beyond ports—in the United States and further afield. Which is just to suggest that research on ports—and research into what I call here the ideology of logistics, in particular—has broad implications at the current conjuncture.

Special issue

Ports in Motion (edited by Elizabeth Sibilia).

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Consent to participate

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Notes

1. Fieldnotes, Port of Los Angeles, San Pedro, CA, July 15, 2024.
2. Fieldnotes, Port of Long Beach, Long Beach, CA, June 11, 2021.
3. Or, as Fredric Jameson once put it, “Conspiracy, one is tempted to say, is the poor person’s cognitive mapping in the postmodern age; it is a degraded figure of the total logic of late capital, a desperate attempt to represent the latter’s system, whose failure is marked by its slippage into sheer theme and content” (1988: 356). See also “Totality as Conspiracy” in *The Geopolitical Aesthetic* (Jameson, 1995: 9–84).
4. Harney and Moten’s “logistical subject” is an apparently novel political subject shaped by the exploitative demands of the logistics industry itself. This is not a traditional liberal subject, but what they call a “porous object” who dedicates their life to ensuring smooth and continuous commodity circulation. While I find this formulation useful as a starting point for understanding how logistics reconfigures the very idea of subjectivity, ultimately it is too abstract, too totalizing, and too detached from the lived experiences of workers themselves to have much analytic purchase (Harney and Moten, 2013: 90).

5. As Peter Chambers notes, with reference to work by Franz Neumann and Adorno, “conspiracy theories are a structural feature of fascism” (2023: 1). See also: Adorno, 2019 [1950].
6. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for this formulation.
7. Interview, Wilmington, CA, August 9, 2023.
8. Fieldnotes, Port of Los Angeles, San Pedro, CA, May 14, 2025.
9. Fieldnotes, Port of Long Beach, Long Beach, CA, October 30, 2024.
10. Interview, San Pedro, CA, October 29, 2021.
11. Fieldnotes, Port of Los Angeles, San Pedro, CA, July 15, 2024.
12. Fieldnotes, Port of Los Angeles, San Pedro, CA, June 5, 2023.
13. Incidentally, Evelyn—along with many of her colleagues—was correct. From the start the 24/7 plan had almost no impact on cargo throughput at L.A. Less than a year after it was announced, the government quietly shut it down. Stephen Lyons, the White House’s Port and Supply Chain Envoy, was surprisingly candid about why the plan failed to produce results: “It’s a free market economy. People are driven by their incentive structures, and they will respond to what will provide them the greatest return on their investment” (Zimmerman, 2022: n/p).
14. For an overview of the many ways that capital has utilized technology to undermine labor power on the U.S. west coast, see Cole (2018).
15. As Nicholas Mirzoeff argues, “visuality” is not simply about what is visible, but about “the authority of the visualizer,” i.e. the capacity to organize, classify, and render space legible and illegible in ways that authorize certain forms of governance while foreclosing others. Automation, I would suggest, intensifies visuality’s asymmetry. In this sense, automated visuality does not merely represent the terminal in a descriptive or neutral sense; rather, it actively produces the terminal as a governable object. (Mirzoeff, 2011, 2).
16. I want to acknowledge here that while my interest in conspiracy theory has little to do with adjudicating its truth content or lack thereof, my analysis is nonetheless premised, in part, on epistemic hierarchy building. I am not sure how to get around this, or even if it is something I should try to avoid. That said, as I hope is clear enough, my overriding concern in this article is with how people *use* conspiracy theory and on what it *does* for them, both individually and as a community. As such, my analysis is not overly concerned with whether the conspiracies advanced by my interlocutors correspond to objective reality or not. Indeed, the point is that these workers engaged in conspiratorial thought for some specific reason. My intention is to reveal this reasoning, and so to determine how these workers understand their own rapidly shifting subject position in relation to port labor processes and logistical political formations that are undergoing rapid change. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for pointing out my own culpability vis-à-vis the adjudication of truth claims here.
17. For a recent description of this effort, see Goodman (2022).
18. The references to “inside” both here and above should be understood in explicitly spatial terms. As Çaylı shows, conspiracy theory routinely mobilizes inside/outside distinctions not simply as metaphors of access or secrecy, but as spatialized claims about belonging and authority.
19. For instance, ILWU leaders referred to concerns about the deployment of 5G in public hearings on automation hosted by the L.A. Board of Harbor Commissioners in 2018.
20. This outcome would mirror research on the relationship between conspiracy theories and political orientation in international contexts. See Imhoff et al. (2022).

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